

American High Teacher's Guide
Lesson Two: Creating Great Images (of People) for Video

Target Audience: High School Students

Subject Area: Media Arts Production

Objective: Students will learn the basic concepts necessary to produce beautiful, professional looking visual compositions (which can then be used in professional television productions).

Equipment: 3Video cameras with (Flip-out screens if possible)
Tri-pod for Video Camera
Video monitor with playback cable attached to Video Camera
Videotape stock that is compatible with selected Video Cameras

Concepts:

- a. **Stability.** We have mechanisms built into our brains that stabilize our visual perception of the world. So, even if our bodies are moving about in a relatively jerky or unstable way, our eyes see a relatively stable or smoothly moving picture of the world. To make stable visual compositions with cameras, however, we have to take special precautions.
- b. **Depth.** The things we videotape are three-dimensional. But video images are only two-dimensional! The task of endowing our flat images with a sense of depth is of great importance if we hope to achieve a feeling of realism in our videotapes.
- c. **Asymmetrical Balance.** The two dimensional figurative arts (such as painting, still photography, and moving image media) share common conventions of composition having to do with the task of putting images of human beings into rectangular frames. If we don't observe these conventions, our images can seem unstable, uncomfortable, out of wack.
- d. **Controlling the Viewer's Gaze.** There are often other, less important things in our pictures that steal the attention of our viewers away from what we, the image makers, want our viewers to see. We have to learn how to minimize these distractions.
- e. **Lighting.** We can use lighting to give a greater feeling of depth to our pictures, to give a sense of time of day or mood, to emphasize or clarify, or simply to make things visible.

Lesson Procedure:

- a. **To illustrate the importance of stability.** Have three students videotape you talking in medium close-up (head and shoulders) from different positions simultaneously: (a) Hand held from 4 feet, (b) Hand held from 30 feet, (c) on a tripod from 10 feet. Talk and talk and talk for at least 5 minutes, encouraging the hand-holding students to hold the image as steady as they can. Rewind the tapes to the beginning and compare them side by side. Of course, the tri-pod mounted shot will be the steadiest. The shot taken hand-held from 4 feet should be relatively steady, but will grow shaky with time as the student's hands get tired. The shot taken hand-held from 30 feet will be shaky throughout. Get your students to understand why the shot taken hand-held from 30 feet away will invariably be unstable—how the zoom lens magnifies the instability just as it magnifies the image. Ask the students which shot they prefer and why. Have students look at Show 2 of *American High* (“Who Am I”) to discuss Morgan’s handheld shooting of his parents (00:20-01:26). What is the advantage of hand-holding the camera (to be able to move quickly)? Is there an advantage to shaky handholding (conveying sense of immediacy, sense of danger).
- b. **To create two-dimensional images that appear to have depth.** Set up negative examples for interview compositions, and encourage the students to improve upon the situation. For example, shoot someone straight ahead, plastered up against a wall. Encourage the students to see how, if they put a lot of space between the interviewee and the background instead, depth perception will be increased. Encourage the students to take a high angle or low angle on the subject and see what that does to depth. Ask which is more flattering (usually the high angle). Ask students to put something in the extreme foreground. Encourage students to consider that we perceive depth more easily if there are objects in foreground, middleground, and background—particularly if the surfaces overlap. Why is that? Examples: Morgan diary about balloons in Show #3 (“Boogie Nights”) 00:43—1:10, Robby diary about Brad coming out (*American High* Website), Sarah’s diary about Robby leaving for college (*American High* Show #1 – “You Only Live Once) – 21:35—21:51.
- c. **To illustrate conventions of asymmetrical balance.** Put a long piece of tape on the TV screen running horizontally, about one-third of the way between the top of the screen and the bottom. Pop in a video copy of *American High* (or any cool TV show). Ask students to see how often the eyes of TV characters fall on that line. Whether in close-up or long shot, the eyes fall on that line 90% of the time. Now shoot a person on videotape in medium closeup with the person’s eyes in the middle of the frame or lower. That looks unbalanced and uncomfortable. Why? Add other pieces of tape to the TV screen to divide the screen like a tic-tac-toe board. Ask the students to observe when major compositional elements fall on one or more of the lines of tape. For example: The horizon falls on the lower third, the sun is on the upper third and on the right third at the same time. You have illustrated the rule of thirds—the notion that we find compositional balance when major elements are arranged in an asymmetrical pattern. This happens a lot! Show other negative examples (violations of the rule of thirds), e.g. the moon

in the center of the screen, the person in the middle of the frame looking off-screen without “lookspace.” Ask the students what’s wrong with these pictures. Examples: Anna’s about boyfriends (*American High* website), Kaytee lookspace in diary about fame (*American High* website),

- d. **To illustrate problems with controlling the viewer’s gaze.** Set up negative examples for interview compositions, and encourage the students to improve upon the situation. For example, shoot a person in talking in close-up while another person is jumping around in the background. Ask the students what their attention goes when they watch the composition. Answer: the eye is attracted by motion and distracted from the main event—the interviewee. Solution: pan the camera over to frame out the jumping person. Another example: Shoot a person in front of a poster or blackboard with legible writing on it. Ask the students where their attention goes. Answer: the eye is attracted to written text. Solution: if the writing is a distraction (not the main event), then take it out of the composition. Another example: shoot a person in medium shot in low light and put another well-lit person in the background. Ask the student where their attention goes. Answer: the eye is attracted to bright or colorful subjects. Solution: move on to the next demonstration. (Use lighting to clarify and emphasize.) Here’s a fun assignment: Ask students to compose shots of people framed within the frame. For example: framed by a doorway, or in a car window, or in the rear-view mirror of a car. Encourage them to see how the frame within the frame leaves little doubt as to where the viewer’s eye should go.
- e. **To illustrate the importance of lighting.** Set up negative examples for interview compositions, and encourage the students to improve upon the situation. For example, shoot a backlit person (e.g. in front of a bright window without frontal light). Encourage students to see how backlight robs the composition of the important detail—what is on the interviewee’s face. Solutions: Draw the window curtains, move the subject to a different background, or (if adventurous) show students how to open the iris of the camera lens. If you do this, have the students see that the subject may be properly exposed now (detail is visible in the face), but detail is lost in the window. A compromise! Another example: Shoot a student wearing a baseball cap directly under a light. The shadow cast by the brim of the cap casts a strong shadow of the student’s face. Nasty. Solutions: Turn the cap around, tilt up the brim, or remove the hat entirely, or move the student back so the light is not directly over head, but in front of the student. Or have the student put a big white piece of cardboard in the subject’s lap, out of the video frame. See how the card bounces light into the shadow area under the cap. Another example: remove all ambient light from the room and illuminate a little desk lamp. Walk the lamp around the interviewee. Get the students to assess the different effects: low angle light (monstrous), side light (dramatic), 3/4 light (“normal”—full modeling). Examples: Dramatic lighting Kiwi diary about fears (*American High Show #1 – “You Only Live Once”*) – 18:47 is sidelit. Tiffany diary about Drew in (*American High Show #8 – “Winter Formalities”*) – 14:36-15:02 is lit from below.

- f. **Additional helpful hints.** (a) Avoiding problems with automatic focus. Compose a tight shot of a person in front of a background with sharp lines (like venetian blinds). The camera might decide to focus on the background instead! Solution: avoid backgrounds with sharp lines. (b) What is the ideal composition and shot scale? Answer: it depends. Set up negative examples for interview compositions, and encourage the students to improve upon the situation. For example, shoot a close-up interview while the interviewee is doing something with their hands off-screen (like playing the guitar). Result: We feel we're missing something. Another example: shoot an interview with the interviewer off the axis of the camera. Result: we get the profile of the interviewee. It would be stronger to see more of their face! Another example: look at Robby's interview of Sarah in *American High Show 1* (11:37-13-12). Wouldn't it be better if Sarah were framed more tightly? What she's saying is so personal and intimate! Basic rule of thumb: in video, closer works better than further away. (c) Hand holding cameras. We've already made it clear that students should get close (and not film from 30 feet away, zoomed in all the way). You should also encourage the students to see that the shot can be held steadier if the eyepiece is not pressed against the eye as the camera operator moves. Help students to use the flip-out screen when doing hand-held work. Encourage your students to stand and move like cat burglars when they shoot hand-held: knees bent, gliding through the room gracefully and silently. It's fun to get a group of them filming like a T'ai Chi group.

Extension Activity & Evaluation Checklist:

Allow students to work in pairs to interview one another at another location. Have them bring the tape into the classroom for a group critique. Evaluate each tape in terms of video composition and lighting by addressing what the students did...

Stability

- a. Did they use a tripod?
- b. If handheld, was the camera close to the subject, using a wide-angle lens?

Depth

- c. Is there distance between the subject and the background
- d. Are there objects in foreground, middleground, and background?
- g. Does the composition take an angle on the subject or is it straight on?

Asymmetrical Balance

- h. Are the eyes on the top third?
- i. Are other Rule of Third opportunities exploited?
- j. Is there sufficient "lookspace" for subjects looking offscreen?
- k. Is there a "frame within the frame?"

The Viewer's Gaze

- l. Are there distractions from the subject (movement, bright objects, text)?

Lighting

- m. Can we see the subject's face?
- n. Are there harsh or unusual shadows on the face?

- o. Is the lighting angle expressive?

Additional

- p. Is the subject in sharp focus?
- q. Is the shot scale ideal for the content of the shot? Too close to see what they're doing? Too far away to get intimacy?

Recommended Reading and Reference Links:

Schroepel, Tom. *The Bare Bones Camera Course for Film and Video* available from <TomSchroepel@worldnet.att.net>

The Digital Filmmaker's Resource Site: <http://www.2-pop.com/>

Exposure: The Internet Resource for Low Budget Filmmakers:
<http://www.exposure.co.uk/>

Adita Video, Inc. Links to Video Resources: <http://www.adita.com/links.htm>

Videomaker Magazine's Website: <http://www.videomaker.com/scripts/index.cfm>

About the Author: Jonathan Mednick is both an award-winning filmmaker and an experienced educator in the fields of film/television production and media studies. This past year, Mednick was a producer and director on the critically acclaimed PBS TV series *American High*. Mednick's role on *American High* included teaching video production to the students at Highland Park High School and supervising the making of the student-produced video diaries that are featured so prominently in the show. Mednick's latest film, *Dita and the Family Business* -- a personal documentary about the family behind New York City's fabled Bergdorf-Goodman Department Store -- will begin its theatrical run in New York's Film Forum in September 2001. Jonathan Mednick is currently teaches film directing and producing at the University of Central Florida. He has also taught media production at New York University, Wesleyan University, and at the University of Iowa.